Reminiscenses

concerning St. James' Church of Kingsessing

as of 1857, and latter

by

the Rev. Charles A. Maison, D. D.

Rector - 1857 - 1892.

afterward Rector Emeritus.

Having been requested to tell of the condition of things in this parish at and soon after the time when I took charge of it, I willingly undertake the task, relying chiefly on what memory may have in store. The written record of these days and years would be worth little, but in experience and memory, they have a meaning which is precious to one who spent so many years in laboring for the spiritual good of those who were committed to his pastoral charge.

I became Rector of St. James' Church in May, 1857. But the meaning of the word "Church" is rather indefinite. It might mean the church building, or the congregation worshipping in it. In either case it does not define the relation existing between the clergyman and the people. A better word describing this relation would be "parish": understanding by this word "the territory in which the members of a congregation live." When we recall the residences of the members of this parish, we shall find that it was a decidedly rural parish and that it had a wide extent - an extent not limited by convocational system, which was inaugurated about 30 years after the beginning of my rectorship - In coming from the well settled part of West Philadelphia into this parish, we found it bisected for a long distance by the Darby Road, now called Woodland Avenue. It was a plank road, having two parallell rows of heavy planks. On this road ran a line of stages, or rather I should say, a stage, which made two trips daily from Darby to Philadelphia and back. In a year or two, however, rails were laid for horse-cars, which made half-hour runs between Darby and the City. For this distance side walks were few and far between.

On either side of this Road and connecting with it were various Roads and Lanes which need not be named, except as they help us to call to mind the scattered residences of parishioners. Now let memory aid us in this interesting task.

Beginning at the North we find the residence of Enoch Gray, a vestryman, near 42nd St. Then we find East of the Schuylkill near Gray's Ferry Road the home of the Harmars, and still farther south, and not far from Darby Road the mansion of Andrew M. Eastwick, a vestryman - On Gray's Lane we are reminded of Dr. Samuel Thomas, a Warden and Vestryman, of Mrs. Ann Thomas, and beyond, of the Palmers, the Albertsons, and Beastons. The Hardings are on Rabbit Lane, and the Keaveys beyond the Baltimore Pike. Going out Church Lane, we find the families of Davis and Franklin, and farther on, and beyond Fernwood, the Whitelays and Henrys and Ashworths at Cardington. Farther south are Mr. Matthews, the Shields, the Banksons, the Chases, the Newlins, Thomas A. Scott, and Mr. Longstreth at Spring Hill.

Returning now to Darby Road and its neighborhood, brief mention must be made of the families of Serrill, Schofield, Bonsall, Beaston, Urian Kershaw, Hansell, Connell, Van Horn, Carpenter, Wickersham, Egee,Bonnaffon, Yocum, Gesner, Hancock, Wylie, Robert Buist, Vestryman and Warden, Taylor, Teamer, Clegg, Passmore, Cross, Battye, Cheyne and Hanbest. Down Tinicum Road, Simon, Lindsay, Holstein, Trites, Hunter, Powers, Franklin and Gauls.

Going now south we recall the residence of Aubray H.Smith Vestryman and his sisters, Mrs Biddle, Andrews, Sladen, Heyl, Grayson, Palmer, Verlenden, Mr. Flickwir Vestryman, Isaac T. Jones Warden and Vestryman, Baily, Davis, Read, Peale, Guillon, and still farther south, Andrews, Cox at Glenolden, McMakin, Thomas Sparks, Vestryman, at Sharon Hill, Helms and the Gesners on their farms near Norwood.

I am conscious that many names have escaped my memory, but names enough have been recalled to show that the parish was strictly a rural parish of large dimensions, extending from West Philadelphia nearly to Norwood, in Delaware County, and from the Schuylkill River, to and beyond the Baltimore Pike on the west.

In 1857 I was the only Episcopal Clergyman im this region, and St, James' Kingsessing, the only Episcopal Church. Since that day, Chapels have been built at the Divinity School and at the Church Home for children, and churches also, St George's Church at West End, St Stephen's at Clifton, Trinity at Collingdale, Epiphany, at Sherwood, St. Titus, Elmwood - and St. Anna's, West Philadelphia.

I may add that a Mission has recently been established in Darby, where a Parish House is building, to be followed by a Church in due time.

Let us come now to consider the Church property, as it was in 1857 and later - And first the Parsonage, as it was then called. The residence was a well-built farm-house standing on a lot of about three acres, which had been purchased from Mr. Paschall. It extended from Church Lane on the north, was bounded on the east by Darby Road, and extended southerly to a lot on which stood a large building, then unoccupied, which had been used as a hotel called the Summit House. The spacious Parsonage lot had a lawn in front, long and wide with large trees, the chief of them being a horse-chestnut tree, which glorified the place in the Spring with its profusion of beautiful flowers. On the south side and rear of the house was a large kitchen-garden, on the north was a pasture ground extending to Church Lane. In the rear was a barn, and near the house a well, which with its wooden pump, provided an abundance of excellent water.

In this parsonage or rectory I dwelt with my family during the thirty-five years of my active Rectorship.

It is time now for us to look at the Church Lot on the opposite side of the Road. It was of fair size and of an irregular shape. In the centre stood the Church building which appeared then mainly as it does now. Near it, a little to the south, was a horse-block of stones, which still remains as a reminder of the former days when some of the people came to church on horses. For the carriages there was a shed near the south line of the lot, having places for a few vehicles. As it became too old and too short, it was removed, and a better and much longer one took its place. Near the west end of the sheds was a well having a wooden pump which was disused.

A short distance back of the church was a trench running north and south, on the banks of which were some large trees and shrubbery. This feature was soon removed, and an appearance of unity given to the grounds. This improvement was followed by the purchase of a triangular piece of ground from Mrs. Garrizues, and afterward by the purchase of another triangular piece from Mr. Serrill. In this way the greatly enlarged church lot became bordered in the rear by Paschall Avenue, and on the north by 68th Street. A city-square was thus made complete, with the exception of a narrow strip on the south, bordering on 69th Street. The strong stone wall was then continued to 69th Street, enclosing Buist's Lane, which was a continuation of Church Lane.

In 1857 the sessions of the Sunday School were held in the gallery of the Church; one class, however, met in the north transept. The need of better accommodation being manifest, a fair stone building was erected through the active interest of Mr. Charles Harmar, a Vestryman, near the southwest corner of the grounds. It served for a long time the needs of the School, and was used for services and meetings of various kinds. This building is now incorporated in the present Rectory.

Latter on, a need being felt for a better provision for secular education, another and larger stone building was erected near 68th Street by Mr. Thomas Sparks, as a Memorial to his son William, who had died in his infancy. This building is incorporated in the Parish House.

It remains for us now, to enter the Church, to see how it appeared inside in 1857, and to notice the improvements made in the interior. Passing by the body of pews which remain unchanged, we approach the Chancel. A low platform and a cuhioned kneeling-step bring us to the wooden railing for communicants, which surrounds the first platform. Just inside the railing is the font - a white marble bowl resting on a slender wooden column. There are two wooden desks of similar size and shape, covered with velvet cushions, the one on the right being the prayer-desk, and the one on the left, the pulpit. There are also two arm-chairs with cushions. In the transept on the right stands the Organ, with seats for the choir enclosed by a wooden screen adorned by red curtains, which after a while mysteriously disappeared.

Back of this platform was another higher platform, which extended to the rear wall of the Chancel. At the end of it was a large table, used for a long time for the Communion Service. It is now used in the Vestry-room. On either side of this table was a large door painted white. The one on the left was never used: the one on the right gave access to the Vestry-room, whose floor was reached by a flight of several steps.

The time has now come for important changes in the Chancel furniture. Through the zeal of some of the younger parishioners the present prayer-desks and seats were made after the designs of an architect, excellent in shape and durable. When they were ready to be placed in the Chancel, some objection was made, and the Rector, to avoid any contention had them placed in the gallery. After they had been there a year, however, at the suggestion of a Vestryman they were put in their proper places. There was also a small pulpit, and a Lectern for the Bible.

Another important improvement was soon made. The idea of it was suggested to Miss Mary Babbit by some Christmas decorations, and she had made, and presented to the Church the beautiful Altar and Reredos which now stand on their own platform. A Credence for the bread and wine before their consecration was added, and through the religious zeal of Miss Sarah Connell a silver paten was presented, which is still in use.

Through the zeal of the Women's Society a stone covered-way was constructed to provide a convenient way of access to the Church from the Vestry-room, a door being opened in the wall to the left of the Chancel. Then the large white doors in the rear wall were removed, and the wall itself properly completed.
The wooden railing for communicants was removed, and a brass railing provided for the improved Chancel.

The Organ was disposed of, and a larger and finer instrument provided through the interest of Mr. Isaac T. Jones.

The present beautiful stone font was the gift of the young women of the parish as a Memorial of my son and namesake.

And lastly the beautiful pulpit was erected (after my time) as a Memorial of Mr. Isaac T. Jones, long time a Vestryman and Warden of the parish.

One who can remember the condition of the Chancel as it was 55 years ago will thankfully appreciate its greatly improved and Church-like appearance.

In closing these imperfect Reminiscenses I would say that in stirring up my memory I have seemed to live my pastoral life over again, have renewed its many scenes of joy and sorrow, and, above all, have had occasion to remember gratefully the uniform kindness and affection of my parishioners.

Oct. 10th 1912.

Chas. A. Maison.